

# Reconstructing the past

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By Shafqat Tanvir Mirza

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A RECURRENT theme in the literature being created by Pakistani Punjabi writers, poets and critics indicates that they are in search of their lost cultural, historical and linguistic identity. They have begun to realise the magnitude of the loss suffered over the centuries, particularly after the British occupation of Punjab.

In 1947 only Amrita Preetam identified it through an appeal to Waris Shah by a daughter of a Punjab, which was drenched in bloodbath, as she wrote reminiscing about Heer's tragedy: Ik roi si dhi Punjab di, toon lakh likh mare vayn/ aij lakhan dhiyaan rondiyaan tainoon Waris Shah noon keyn (A daughter of Punjab cried and you wrote a thousands of laments/ today thousands cry out to you, Waris Shah).

The demand to introduce Punjabi as a medium of instruction at least at the primary level did not sit well with those who supported the use of Urdu across the board in Punjab, the province which most served the cause of the Urdu language. There was an all out effort to confuse the single language issue by encouraging different offshoots of Punjabi to declare themselves as independent languages.

These tactics harmed the search for the literary and cultural identity of Punjab. Such moves are still afloat; for instance, the first published version of Mian Muhammad Bukhsh's Saiful Muluk (108 years old) has been reproduced in original calligraphy, with a foreword by Prof Muhammad Arif in which he challenges Mian Muhammad himself by asserting that the Mian was not a Punjabi poet, rather Paharri was the language in which he composed his poetry but Punjabi scholars declared him a Punjabi poet.

In saying this Prof Arif forgets the 100 verses Mian Sahib had written about Punjabi poets, from Baba Farid to Waris Shah, and among whom he included himself. Gen Ziaul Haq was the first head of state who formally patronised such divisive moves.

Then, in the last many years some people well-read in English and foreign literatures have focused their attention on the rebel soul of Punjab. In this respect Najm Hosain Sayed's latest drama set in the Jallianwala Bagh period falls in the same category as his dramas about Dullah Bhatti and Ahmad Khan Kharal.

Many new writers and poets have joined Najm in taking this trend further. Last year Nazeer Kahut wrote the 900-page novel *Wagah*, which covers the period from the British invasion to until they left Punjab bleeding in 1947. Before that Mir Tanha Yusufi had written a 600-page novel *Kala Chanan* which is set in the same period. The latest novel *Jand da Angiar* by Farkhanda Lodhi harks back to the 1857 hero Ahmad Khan Kharal and his rebellion which was put down by the British until the next generation witnessed the massacre of Jallianwala Bagh in Amritsar.

The history of Punjab has also drawn the attention of modern writers. Punjabis involved in the freedom struggle or literature during the last century were the subject of Iftikhar Warriach Kalarvi's book *Ashiq te Varyaam*.

Awami Jamhoori Forum, a magazine inclined towards the Left, devoted its special issue to Punjab and its Leftist lot. Then the late Anees Nagi, once a big voice against the use of Punjabi language, wrote a book on the poetry of Bulleh Shah. That also was an effort to probe into Punjabi thinking in the past perspectives.

On the personalities who were involved in the Punjabi affairs two special issues of *Suneha* were brought out, one on Chaudhry Shahabuddin, who had translated *Musaddas-i-Hali* into Punjabi verse and the other on the poet Saeen Hayat Pasruri, who fought for freedom from the platform of *Majlis-i-Ahrar*.

Two books on the freedom movement and one on the poet Ustad Daman were also published last year. Among the poets and writers of Punjabi who were specially remembered and about whom articles appeared in Punjabi magazines are Bulleh Shah, Hashem Shah, Khwaja Farid, Amrita Preetam, Sharif Kunjahi, Ahmad Rahi, Kanwal Mushtaq and Sara Shagufta. These were efforts to make the past an effective part of the present.

Khwaja Farid and Sindhi-Punjabi vocabulary by Haneef Chaudhry came as a good effort to cut the separatists down to size. Dr Nasir Rana's bi-annual *Lekh* (nine issues so far) is also making a healthy contribution to research and criticism in Punjabi.

Magazines including *Lehran*, *Saver International*, *Trinjan*, *Likhari*, *Khoj*, *Pancham*, *Naagmani* and *Pakheru* (for children) are all making good contribution to enrich the language and literature and setting the trend to for the revival of Punjabi. This is likely to continue in the year(s) ahead.